

Biden Administration's Immigration Policy Puts Venezuelan Immigrants in Limbo

- Camila Llorente

When Ligia, a 33-year-old bioanalyst, left Maracaibo, Venezuela, last year, she and her family brought only three small bags packed with toys, medicine, cash, documents, and three changes of clothes for each family member. In Venezuela, Ligia's husband lost his job in December, right before New Year's Eve, and couldn't find a new one. The rest of their extended family were already out of the country, including in the U.S, Colombia, and Spain. So, Ligia and her husband sold everything they had—their cars, house, TV, and clothes—and began the 10-day trip by car, plane, and foot, from Maracaibo to Katy, Texas, where they hoped to find a better life for their kids: Isabel, 9, Ana, 7, and Lucas, 3.

"People in Venezuela were starving; they were in need. I had friends in that situation, and obviously, we didn't want to get there," Ligia, who asked not to use her full name for safety reasons, said. "We feared that the money would run out." (All of the interviews conducted for this article were in Spanish, and I have provided English translation.)

Ligia and her family felt fortunate in their journey to the U.S. compared to others who have lost their lives while crossing the Darien Gap—a region located on the border of Colombia and Panama. Crossing this gap means walking over 60 miles through a forest that contains drug traffickers, armed guerrillas, and deadly creatures such as TK that are part of the fauna of this region. This year, many Venezuelans have risked their lives trying to reach U.S. territory, as the New York Times reported. The most challenging part of Ligia's journey was waiting three days in the U.S. government shelters, separated from her husband and not knowing what would happen next, she said. She described the shelters as large, cold cabins where she and her children spent the day, barely able to sleep, waiting for a guard to come with a list announcing their release.

But when Ligia described the moment she stepped foot in the U.S., over our WhatsApp video, her eyes were bright, and a large smile took over her face. Her brother and parents, residing in Texas, were waiting for them, something atypical for the new wave of Venezuelan immigrants. Many come here not knowing where to go or who to reach out to.

More than 180,000 Venezuelans such as Ligia and her family have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border this past year, according to the Department of Homeland Security. They have risked their lives on a dangerous journey to escape the dictatorship of President Nicolás Maduro. But in October, the Biden administration announced the extension of Title 42, the Trump administration's policy that prevents migrants from seeking asylum at the border. Venezuelans previously exempt from this policy are now being expelled from U.S. territory. The Biden administration also announced a parole program for Venezuelans entering the U.S. who are in

need of protection. Up to twenty-four thousand Venezuelan citizens may now apply for entry from outside of the U.S. However, thousands of Venezuelans like Ligia, who already came here seeking asylum, now have an “illegal” status because the program does not apply to people already inside the U.S.

Ligia dreamed of coming to the U.S. to work in her professional field. However, after she arrived and learned about her legal status, that dream became unattainable. As she spoke to me over WhatsApp, she was juggling the responsibilities of a mother while also trying to find a way to help support her family. She never imagined the challenges she would face in the U.S., she said, and how hard it would be to achieve her dream. Her eyes teared up as she confided that she wasn’t sure it was worth all the sacrifice to get to the U.S.

“If you ask me if I would do it again, I say no. I would not,” Ligia said.

David Smolansky, the commissioner of the Organization of American States Secretary-General for the Venezuelan migrant and refugee crisis, told me there are five primary reasons why 7.1 million Venezuelans, according to UN Refugee Agency Data, have left the country since 2015: the humanitarian emergency, specifically the food shortage and difficulty accessing food; the public health system’s collapse; the regime’s human rights violations; high crime rates, and the lack of essential services such as water, fuel, and electricity.

"Venezuela has not been fixed. Venezuela is disintegrating. Nobody leaves a country that has been fixed." Smolansky said
Like Smolansky, Venezuelans who emigrated to the U.S. in previous years have decided to dedicate part of their lives to helping new Venezuelans entering the country.

Diana Mendt, a 66-year-old Venezuelan-American architect and activist who moved to the U.S. in 1983, is also part of that group.

Mendt manages *Acción Social Venezuela*, a Houston non-profit that collects donations to assist Venezuelan immigrants when they arrive. They have rented two storages in Houston to store all the donations. The



“Venezuelans at Acción Social Venezuela’s storage lining up to get what they need”

Photo courtesy of Diana Mendt.

storage shelves contain clothes, furniture, toys, towels, bedsheets, pillows, etc. Every Saturday, dozens of Venezuelans line up, waiting to get whatever they need.

Mendt said that the new immigrants arrive with sunburned skin, damaged or wet shoes, bags with their few belongings, and tired faces. For her, the toughest part is seeing the frightened faces of children, whom she tries to distract with toys while their parents take what they need.

As a Venezuelan-American, she understands that the immigration crisis affects many in the country. But she does not support the decisions made lately, specifically the most recent policy change by the U.S. government.

"It's the most unfair thing in the world. Because, on the one hand, we Americans say, gosh, I'm paying for these people to stay here illegally. So, for us as Americans, that's terrible. But on the other hand, I say, well, these people come from a place where they have absolutely nothing, starting with the fact that they don't even have water." Mendt said. "So, how come after they are told to come because they were invited, and suddenly, they can't come in, they have to go back? Hello? Who is going to go back after risking their life?"

Smolansky also questioned the U.S. government's policy change, given that the U.S. government considers Venezuela a dictatorship. He noted that the humanitarian parole offered by the U.S. government is not accessible to the majority trying to flee the country.

Mendt and Smolansky want a change in this new policy so that Venezuelans already in the country, like Ligia, can be given the opportunity to succeed in the country.

"They have to increase the number of people allowed under humanitarian parole. Because right now, it is not humanitarian at all." Smolansky said. "In just one month, more Venezuelans have entered the country than the number of humanitarian paroles that have been granted."

Like many other Venezuelans, Ligia is not here because she dreamed of leaving her country—she had to. But now, Ligia wants to work, learn English, and become a bilingual teacher. She wants to feel part of American society, even though she knows the road is hard.

"Right now, I can't say that I'm happy," Ligia said. "But the truth is that emigrating is a path of resilience."